

# The Skeleton in the Attic

That Has Made the Mystery of the Young Woman, Erroneously Identified and Buried Twenty Years Ago as Carrie Selvage, More Inscrutable Than Ever.

By John Sheldon

**E**ARLY on the morning of Sunday, March 11, 1900, Carrie T. Selvage, a pretty young school teacher, disappeared most mysteriously from the Indianapolis Union States Hospital at No. 1333 North Capitol avenue. She was a hospital patient, under treatment for a severe nervous breakdown, the result of overwork. At the time of her disappearance she was wearing a long flannelette wrapper and felt house slippers.

Late that same night Rufus Cantrell, head of a notorious gang of grave robbers, all colored, known as the Marion County body-snatchers, sent several of his men to a nearby cemetery where they opened a new grave from which they stole the corpse. Their object, of course, was to sell the body to a medical college for dissecting purposes.

After robbing the grave and carefully replacing the earth to hide the traces of their crime, one of Cantrell's men went ahead of the others to the side entrance to the cemetery to make sure that the coast was clear before they carried out the body.

Creeping cautiously through the bushes to the cemetery gate which opens into a dark alley, the ghoul peeped around the corner and then screamed in terror, for directly in front of him and stealthily advancing in the shadow of the wall was a young woman. She was hatless and her dis-

at once to the college. It was thought that possibly he could decide whether or not it was Miss Selvage by an examination of her teeth which showed evidence of careful dentistry.

The dentist arrived presently, but was undecided. He advised sending for Joseph Selvage, a well known real estate dealer, brother of the missing girl. When he reached the college Mr. Selvage agreed with the dentist that the body on the operating table might be that of his sister, making all due allowances for changes in facial appearance due to her nervous breakdown, exposure and death. The clothes in which the body had been delivered to the medical authorities were not those which Miss Selvage had worn at the time of her disappearance from the hospital. The dentist recognized the gold filling in her teeth as being much similar to some which he had done for Miss Selvage several months previous. And there the identification ceased.

The body was removed from the operating table and given decent burial under the belief that the mystery of the school teacher's disappearance had been, to a certain extent, solved.

Investigation of the circumstances under



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tions, upstairs and down as well as in the attic. The contract also called for the removal of a tiny and almost inaccessible cupola which perched above the main attic.

Dan Jones, a structural iron worker, had charge of this part of the work. Probably he was the first man to enter that little cubby-hole above the attic since the day the building was completed over half a century ago. Nobody ever went in there because of its inaccessibility.

Viewed from the avenue it was simply an ornamental cupola placed there by an architect who was aiming for effect. As far as usefulness was concerned it might as well never have existed.

Jones got into the cupola by enlarging the opening between it and the attic. Inside he found himself face to face with a headless standing skeleton clothed in the remnants of a long, blue, flannelette wrapper and felt house slippers. The skull had fallen to the floor and rolled off to one side. The remainder of the skeleton was leaning against the wall.

Joseph and Edward Selvage, brothers of the school teacher who had disappeared 20 years previous, identified the slippers as a pair which they had given to their sister a short time before she vanished. The wrapper, too, was hers. Dr. Paul E. Robinson, coroner, said the skeleton was that of a young woman. This time there was no question of the accuracy of the identification. The mystery of Miss Selvage's disappearance had been solved.

## Frozen to Death

Instead of leaving the hospital grounds on the morning she vanished so completely, Miss Selvage had crept upstairs into the attic and from there through the tiny aperture into the cupola where in her dazed condition she must have stood helplessly waiting until she died. The assumption is that she froze to death, standing there in the dark corner of the attic. March 11, 1900, was a bitterly cold day in Indianapolis and with the temperature below freezing point in the draughty attic the young woman, scantily clothed as she was, must have succumbed quickly.

With the mystery of her disappearance solved a new one had arisen. Who was the other young woman who died in the hands of the grave rob-

bers and whose body was saved from dissection simply through mistaken identification?

Rufus Cantrell cannot offer any solution. With callous apologies he has explained that so many bodies were handled by the gangs of grave robbers that it would be impossible to remember each one.

## Origin of Leap Year Proposal for Women

**I**t took the canny Scotch to see the advantages of having a year come along every so often in which the girls could officially pop the question without being regarded as either reckless or indiscreet. It was monny a lang year ago, 1288 to be exact, that the Scotch put the Lady's Proposal Amendment in their Constitution or bylaws.

It appears the Scotch were particular about this, for the matrimonial magistrates of that time were authorized to clap a fine of a pound or five beans in the old days on any bird who ran out and refused the faire dame who asked him for his heart and hand. The old Scotch law on the subject says:

"It is a statut and ordaint that during the rein of hir maist blissit Mageste, for ilk yeare knowne as lepe yeare, ilk mayden ladye of bothe hiegh and lowe estait shall hae liberte to hespeake ye man she likes, albeit he refuses to taik hir to be his lawful wyfe, he shall be multied in ye sum same pundis or less, as his estait may be, except and awis gif he can make it appear that he is bethrothit ane ither woman he then shall be free."

This demonstrates apparently that the Scotch must have been rather fair and square with their early statuts, and also that they must have been bad spellers from a modern viewpoint. Still, they were first over the bars with it, and not long after that Johnny Walker was elected the first mayor of Dumfriesshire on a wet ticket.

Of the origin of the custom for women to woo instead of being wooed there is no satisfactory explanation, says an authority, so the Scotch cannot claim that.

Following the lead of the Scotch in this important matter the French passed a similar law and in the 15th century the custom was legalized in Genoa and Florence. Leap year has been growing in popularity ever since with ye faire dame.

Also it is set forth that the term "leap year" is more or less a nickname (more properly known as blue tide) and has nothing to do with the vintners' crop the girls take when they Harry or Hector to become their wedded husband.



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heveled hair hung around her shoulders. She wore a long, loose gown and soft-soled shoes.

From confessions made when Rufus Cantrell and some of the grave robbers were caught later and sent to the penitentiary at Michigan City, it appeared evident that as soon as they had recovered from their first fright at the unexpected appearance of the woman at the cemetery gate, they had overpowered her to prevent her from giving an alarm, and had taken her to the basement of a building on Indiana avenue where, three days later, she died. Her body, they confessed, was sold for \$50 and eventually turned over to a West Side medical clinic for dissection.

Meanwhile police, private detectives and friends of the missing Carrie T. Selvage had been conducting a most systematic search for her. Every possible clue was traced to its end. Ponds and lakes, Fall creek and White river were dragged. Copies of her photographs together with descriptive personal details were sent broadcast without success. The young school teacher had vanished.

## Saved from the Dissecting Table

Then a strange thing happened. Medical students attending a clinic in a West Side collegiate institution were assembled in the operating theatre for a practical demonstration in dissecting. On the operating table was the body of a woman, apparently young and well-formed, covered with a white sheet.

When the face of the dead woman was uncovered one of the medical students casually remarked that it bore a somewhat vague resemblance to the published photographs of the missing Carrie Selvage. Other students agreed with him and during the discussion that followed one student suggested calling up a dentist friend of his who, he remembered, had done some dental work for Miss Selvage, and asking him to come

which the body had been turned over to the medical college led to the arrest of Rufus Cantrell and his gang of grave robbers and to confessions by several of the men that they had been implicated in many thefts of newly-interred bodies from cemeteries in and around Indianapolis. Two of these gangs had operated, the Marion County ghouls under the leadership of Rufus Cantrell, and the Hamilton County gang, which confined its depredations principally to suburban cemeteries.

## Battle Between Grave Robbers

The two gangs, it appeared, met one night by accident in the Ebenezer cemetery, both bent upon grave robbery. A fight followed, during which one man was killed. The victors sold his body to a middleman for the usual \$50. And the go-between redispersed of it to a medical college for purposes of dissection. The colleges, it is only fair to state, were under the impression that the bodies obtained in this manner were those of unclaimed derelicts who had died in almshouses and other institutions and which, otherwise, would have been buried in the Potter's field at the expense of the county. In death they were of more value than in life and the surgical clinics for which such bodies were always in demand, were made in the interests of medical science.

Shortly after the disappearance of Miss Selvage from the Union States Hospital the institution was closed. Since then the building, originally the Indianapolis Orphan Asylum, has been used as a rooming house, but a few weeks ago a contract was given out for a complete remodeling of the building, which is henceforth to be used as a garage.

The brick front of the building was to be torn out and a gilder set in place to carry the weight over the new garage doorway. This necessitated the tearing down of some interior walls and parti-



The Old Union States Hospital Where the Skeleton of Miss Selvage Has Been Found.